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GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS AND HIS ANTECEDENTS

A PAPER
READ BEFORE THE WORCESTER SOCIETY OF ANTIQUITY,
November 1st 1892

BY HENRY H. CHAMBERLIN

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"A combination and a form indeed, where every god did seem
to set his seal, to give the world assurance of a man."

Worcester, Mass.
Nov. 1st 1892

WORCESTER MASSACHUSETTS

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GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS AND HIS ANTECEDENTS.

The death of this distinguished scholar and philanthropist has left a void in the world of letters and society which must long remain unfilled.

Of the poets, philosophers, statesmen and scholars, whose loss the world has lately been called upon to deplore, there is not one whose name was dearer to humanity than that of George William Curtis.

Other pens have written his eulogy, which can only have been the simple truth: it remains for us to trace his antecedents, and review their and his connection with the history of our own town, whose citizens must always be proud that he was an off-shoot of its sturdy stock.

The first of the family to settle in Worcester was Ephraim Curtis, of Sudbury, son of Henry Curtis, of Watertown; one of his descendants, to whom I am much indebted, tells how "among the first of the daring spirits to explore the wilderness, towards the Connecticut River, Young Curtis with his all on his back, and with gun and axe in his hands, came from Sudbury to Worcester, around by the head of Long Pond, and made here the first white man's settlement."

He built the first white man's dwelling ever erected in Worcester, in the neighborhood of the present Curtis homestead, where he had acquired 50 acres of land, having his first title to that and more, from Sagamore John, chief of the Nipmucks, who were then his only neighbors. This house was built in or about 1673, and within the two years following seven or eight houses had been built. But early in 1675 the settlement was abandoned by its few inhabitants,

warned by the hostile attitude of their barbarian neighbors , and our pioneer probably sought safety among his old friends and neighbors in Sudbury, for we learn from the Colonial Records that " In July, 1675, the Governor and Council employed Ephraim Curtis to visit the Nipmuck Indians at Quabaog (Brookfield), and ascertain their position in the controversy which had begun.

On his return he exhibited a report, which is here copied verbatim : " To the honored Governor and Councle of the Massathussets Colony in New England. Whereas your honors imployed your servant to conduct Uncheas his six men homewards as far as Wabaquesesue, and alsoe to make a perffet discovery of the motions of the Nipmug or Western Indians, your honors may be pleased here to see my return and relation. I conducted Unkeas his men safly while I com in sight of Wabquesesue new planting fielde ; first to Natuck, from thence to Marelborrow, from thence to Esenemisco, from thence to Mumchogg, from thence to Chabanagonkomug, from thence to Mayenecket, from thence over the river to Senecksig, while wee cam nere to Wabaquasesue, where they were very willing we should leave them, and returned thanks to Mr. Governor and to all them that shewed them kinduess, and alsoe to us for our company. And in my jorny my chefe indever was to inquire after the motions of the Indians. The first information which I had was at Marelborrow att the Indian fort, which was that my hous at Quansigamug was robed ; the Indians, to confern it, shewed me som of the goods, and alsoe som other goods which was non of mine.

" They told mee it was very daingerous for mee to goe into the woods, for that Mattounas, which they said was the leader of them that robed my house, was in company of fifty men of Philip's complices, rainging between Chabanagonkamug and Quatesook and Mendan and Warwick, and they might hapen to meet mee ; and if I mised them, yet it was daingerous to meet or see the other Nipmug Indians

which wer gathern together, for they would be reddey to shoot mee as soon as they saw me. * * * With newes thos three Natuck Indians which wer with mee as volenteers were discourriged and told me that if I did not provide mor company they wer not willing to go with mee. Hearing this I repaired to the Consable of Marelborrow and to the milletary officers and tould them my busness, and they pressed two men with horses and armes to goe along with mee. And soe as we passed the forementioned place, wee could not find any Indians, neither in tents nor felds; but after we passed Senecksik, som milds into the woods westwards wee found an Indian path newly mad. There being with mee a vollenter Indian that com from the Indians out of the wilderness, but two or three days before, and hee tould mee hee would find them out.

“So in our travell wee followed this tract many milds, and found many tents built, wherein I suppose they might keep their randivos for a day or two; and soe wee found three places wher they had picthed, but found no Indians. And following still in pursuit of the tract, wee com to the lead mynes by Springfield onto road wher wee saw new footing of Indians; and soe looking out sharp, in about two milds riding wee saw two Indians, which when we saw I sent the Indian that went with mee from Marelborrow to speek with them. But soe soone as they had discovered us they ran away from us; but with fast rideing and much calling two of our Indians stopped one of them; the other ran away. We asked the Indian wher the other Indians were; hee being surprised with feare could scarcely speak to us, but only tould us that the Indians were but a littel way from us. Soe then I sent the Marelborrow Indian before us, to tell them that the Govoner of the Massathusets messenger was a coming with peaceable words; but when hee cam to them they would not believe him; hee therfore cam riding back and meet us. These Indians have lately begun to settel themselves upon an Iland containing about

four acres of ground, being compassed round with a brood miry swamp on the one sid and a muddy river with meadow on both sides of it on the other sid, and but only one place that a hors could posably pass, and these with a great deal of difficulty by reson of the mier and dirt.

“ Befor wee com to the river ther mett us att least forty Indians att a littel distance from the river, some with their guns upon their shoulders, others with ther guns in ther hands reddy cocked and primed. As wee cam nere to the river most of them next to the river presented att us. All my acquaintance would not know mee, although I saw ner twenty of them together and asked ther welfare, knowing that many of them could speke good English. I spak to many of them in the Governor’s name, which I called my master, the great Sachim of the Massathusets Englesh, requiring them to owne their fidellyty and ingaidgement to the Englesh, telling them that I cam not to fight with them nor to hurt them but as a messinger from the Governor to put them in mind of their ingaidgement to the Englesh. I think some of them did beleve mee, but the most of them would not. Ther was a very great upror amonghst them ; som of them would have had mee and my company presently kiled ; but many others, as I understood afterwards, wer against it. I required ther Sachims to com over the river ; but they refused, saying that I must com over to them. My company wer something unwilling, for they thought themselves in very gread dainger wher wee wer ; they said what shall wee bee when wee are over the river amongst all the vile rout ? I tould them wee had better never have sen them, then not to speak with ther Sachims, and if wee run from them in the tim of this tumult they would shoot after us and kill som of us. Soe with much difficulty wee got over the river and meadow to the Iland wher they stood to face us att our coming out of the mire, many Indians with the guns presented att us, reddy cocked and primed. Soe wee rushed between them and called for ther Sachim ; they

presently faced about and went to surround us, many of them with ther guns cocked and primed att us. We rushed between them once or twice, and bid them stand in a body, and I would face them ; but still the uprore continued with such noyes that the aire rang. I required them to lay down ther armes, and they commanded us to put up our armes first, and com of our horses, which I refused to doe. Some of them which were inclinable to believe us, or wer our friends, som layd down ther armes, but the others continued the uprore for a while ; and with much threatening and perswasion, at last the uprore ceased. Many of them sayd they would neyther believe mee nor my master without hee would send them two or three bushells of powder. At lenth I spok with ther Sachims, which wer five, and ther other grandes, which wer about twelv more ; our Natick Indians seemed to be very industrious all this tim to still the tumult and to persuad the Indians. And as soone as I cam to speak with the Sachims, we dismounted and put up our armes. I had a great deal of speech with them by an interpreter, being brought to ther court and sent out again three or four times.

“ The nams of the Sachims are thes : 1, Muttaump ; 2, Konkewasco ; 3, Willymachen ; 4, Upchatuck ; 5, Keehood ; 6, Nontatousoo. Muttaump I perceive is chosen to bee head over the other five, and was the chefe speaker. These company in number I judg may bee ner two hundred of men. They would fain have had mee to stay all night ; I asked the reason of some that could speak English ; they sayd that they had som messengers at Cunnetequt as some southward, and that was the reson they would have mee stay. I asked them the reson of their rud behaviour toward us, and they sayd that they heard that the English had kiled a man of thyres about Merrimak river, and that they had an intent to destroy them all. I left them well appeased when I cam away. Mor might be added ; but thus far is a true relation, p'r your honers most humbel servant.

“ EPHRAIM CURTIS.”

Curtis, who had been commissioned lieutenant, was again sent forth by the Council in the interest of peace, and held a conference with four of the sachems of the neighboring tribes "and received assurances of their peaceful intentions. Induced by these deceptive promises, Capt. Edward Hutchinson* and Captain Thomas Wheeler were sent into the interior" with a small force. When near Brookfield they were attacked by a party of 300 Indians, "lying in ambush, in a narrow defile between a steep hill and a deep swamp, and with the first fire from the Indians eight men were killed, and five wounded, including the two commanders."

"The survivors of the ill-fated company with difficulty effected a retreat to the town, where they fortified one of the largest houses."

An interesting account of their subsequent experience is given by Captain Wheeler, entitled "A True Narrative of the Lord's Providences in various dispensations towards Captain Edward Hutchinson and myself, and those who went with us, into the Nipmug country, and also to Quabaog, alias Brookfield."

"Within two hours after our coming to the said house, or less, the said Capt. Hutchinson and myself posted away Ephraim Curtis of Sudbury, and Henry Young of Concord; to go to the honored Council, at Boston, to give them an account of the Lord's dealing with us, and our present condition. When they came to the further end of the town, they saw the enemy rifling of houses, which the inhabitants had forsaken, the post fired upon them, and immediately returned to us again, they discerning no safety in going forward, and being desirous to inform us of the enemies' actings, that we might the more prepare for a sudden assault upon them."

* This Edward Hutchinson was the son of Ann Hutchinson, who so long and so steadily withstood the persecutions of the Government and Clergy of the Massachusetts Colony.

This assault followed with great violence but was bravely resisted.

"I," says Wheeler, "being desirous to hasten intelligence to the Honored Council, of our present great distress, we being so remote from any succor, it being between 60 and 70 miles from us to Boston, where the Council useth to sit, and fearing our ammunition would not last long to withstand them if they continued so to assault us, I spake to Ephraim Curtis, to adventure forth again on that service and to attempt it on foot, as the way wherein there was most hope of getting away undiscovered. He readily assented, and accordingly went out; but there were so many Indians every where thereabouts, that he could not pass without apparent hazard of life; so he came back again; but, towards morning the said Ephraim adventured forth the third time and was fain to creep on his hands and knees for some space of ground, that he might not be discerned by the enemy, who waited to prevent our sending if they could have hindered it. But through God's mercy, he escaped their hands, and got safely to Marlborough, though very much spent, and ready to faint, by reason of want of sleep before he went from us, and his sore travel, night and day, in that hot season, till he got thither, from whence he went to Boston."

Another episode of this war, occurring within our borders, becomes interesting, although our hero, Ephraim Curtis, was not "in it." Capt. Gookin says: "Two companies of soldiers, under Captain Sill and Captain Henchman, having rescued some captives held by the Indians, at Grafton or Hassanamessit, they marched to a place called Pakachoag, about ten miles distant from Hassanamessit, towards the northwest, where was plenty of good Indian corn. * * * * "Here our forces took up their quarters one night, there being two wigwams, which were good shelter for our soldiers—the weather being wet and stormy. The next morning our forces searched about the

corn-fields, to find the enemy, but could not discover them,
 * * * but " in their search they found above
 100 bushels of indian corn newly gathered, and a great
 quantity of corn standing. About 10 o'clock in the
 forenoon, the English captains and their soldiers marched
 back to Hassanamessit. Being gone about two miles
 on their way, Captain Henschman, missing as he apprehended,
 his letter case, wherein his writings and orders
 were, he sent back two Englishmen and the indian
 Thomas, on horseback, to see at the wigwam, where he
 lodged, to find his papers; these messengers, accordingly
 going back, the indian led them the way, and ascending up
 a steep hill at the top whereoff stood the wigwams; as soon
 as ever he discovered it, being not above six rods distant,
 he saw two Indian enemies standing at the wigwam door,
 newly come out, and four more sitting at the fire in the
 house. At which sight he bestirred himself, and looking
 back, called earnestly (as if many men were behind coming
 up the hill), to hasten away and encompass the enemy.

"One of the enemy, thereupon, presented his gun at our
 indian; but the gun missing fire, whereupon, the rest of
 them that were in the wigwam, came all out, and ran away
 as fast as they could, suspecting that the English forces
 were at hand. And then Thomas, with his two comrades,
 having thus prudently scared away the enemy, they thought
 it seasonable *also* to ride back again to their company as
 fast as *they* could.

"And indeed there was good reason for it; because
 Thomas, the indian, had only a pistol; one of the English-
 men, who was their surgeon, a young man, had no gun;
 the third had a gun but the flint was lost; so that they
 were in ill case to defend themselves, or offend the enemy;
 but God preserved them, by the prudence and cunning of
 the Indian; which deliverance one of the Englishmen di-
 rectly acknowledged to me, attributing their preservation,
 under God, to this fellow; so they got safe to their

captain, who in the interim, searching diligently, had found his letter-case, and staid for these messengers."

After the breaking up of the infant settlement here, in 1675, caused by the outbreak of "King Philip's war," Ephraim Curtis having returned to Sudbury, as has been seen, where he died at the age of 92 years, leaving two sons, John, known in colonial times as Captain John, and Ephraim, Jr.,—both of whom were among the earliest settlers,—they having acquired lands through their father or by grants from the committee of settlement; Captain John acquiring the original homestead still in the family—and Ephraim, Jr., having large estates on or near Packachoag; the descendants of Ephraim, in the later generations lived on Plantation Street, where were born our esteemed fellow-townsmen, Albert Curtis, and his brothers and sisters, consisting of a family of eight, of whom Albert was the youngest, son, and is the only survivor, still attending to his daily business, in vigorous health, at the ripe age of 85 years.

To return to the elder branch of the family represented by Captain John Curtis, from whom George William was descended; he was a man of mark in the early days of the colony, as military commander and otherwise. He is described by Mr. Tyler P. Curtis as "a small, proud man, priding himself much on his horsemanship; he died at the age of ninety-five years, leaving his real estate to his son, Tyler Curtis." There are mentioned in his will seven children and twelve grand-children.

Some of the bequests in this will are interesting. "To his son Joseph he gave all his wearing apparel except his best coat and red jacket, and a tract of land at the head or pass of Long Pond and its border, including 'Wigwam Hill,' afterwards owned by his grandson Nathaniel.

"To his daughter, Mary Chamberlain, he gave his pew in the gallery of the old South Church, and five pounds

lawful money, with what he had advanced." Mary carried away the coat of arms received from London, but this is now in the Curtis family.

To his daughter, Sarah Jones, ten pounds, with what he had before given.

To his son William eighteen pounds lawful money ; William was supposed to be a colonel in the British army, having later on visited his family from Canada.

To the twelve grand-children mentioned in the will he left 5 shillings each, lawful money.

One of these grandchildren was David Curtis, son of John Curtis, Jr. He learned the blacksmith's trade, and is thought to have carried on his business first in Lincoln Street ; he first lived in a hip-roofed cottage which, not many years ago, stood on the east side of Lincoln Street behind three splendid elms, which were planted by David Curtis's own hand, and which are still showing a hale and vigorous old age, promising another century of life and beauty, unless they are cut down by the vandal axe of municipal improvement. David Curtis afterward occupied a house at the corner of Main and School Streets, with his shop a little way down School Street, still retaining the cottage in Lincoln Street, which became the home of his widow, after her second marriage.

David Curtis had two sons. George, the father of George William, and Edward, both of whom removed to Providence in early manhood. He also had three daughters—Mrs. Rogers, of Providence, Mrs. John Green, wife of the founder of the Green Library, and Mrs. Thornton A. Merrick ; the last two being well-known members of Worcester society fifty years ago.

George Curtis was employed in the office of his brother-in-law, Mr. Rogers, till he became cashier of a bank, in Providence, where he married a daughter of Judge Burrill, who was then Chief-Justice of the Supreme Court of Rhode Island, having previously been Senator in Congress ; by her

he had two sons, Burrill and George William. The latter is believed to have derived from his mother some of those finer intuitions which, combined with the sturdy qualities inherited from the paternal stock, made him that "PURITAN CAVALIER" he has so aptly been named. (Mrs. Curtis is remembered by a lady of this city, as one of the most beautiful and accomplished ladies of the period). George Curtis, seeking a larger field for the exercise of his financial abilities, later removed to New York, where, by a second marriage, he had three other sons, Samuel, John Green and Edward Curtis, the latter of whom is a practicing physician in New York City. John Green Curtis is Professor in Columbia College.

The two older sons were frequent and always welcome visitors to their aunt, Mrs. Dr. Green, and to the family of Dr. Benjamin Heywood, during their childhood, and George William is remembered as an amiable and pleasant acquisition to the society of the town during his occasional visits here in later years.

"George William Curtis was born Feb. 24, 1824. From the age of fifteen to nineteen years he studied at a boarding school at Jamaica Plain, and afterwards for a year with a private tutor."

At twenty, in deference to the wishes of his father, the young man was placed in an importing house in New York City. But the mercantile life little suited him. Through his mother, as has been said, he had derived a taste for other than commercial pursuits. He soon quitted the counting-room, and with his older brother, Burrill, found congenial and instructive society with the transcendentalists of Brook Farm. Here the brothers spent four years amid that group of philosophers and sages whose names will never die; and here George William laid up a store of happy recollections for his later years.

From Brook Farm he went to a farm in Concord, where the brothers passed two years in rural pursuits;

though perhaps their richest crops were not gathered from the soil, but dropped from the ripe lips of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Alcott, Parker and the rest, at those ambrosial feasts in Emerson's study.

This brother, Burrill, went abroad soon after the Concord episode. George William spent four years abroad, roaming leisurely through Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Holland, Egypt, Palestine, and England; and during this time he made the acquaintance of men of letters and artists, who became his life-long friends, chief of whom were Thackeray and the Brownings.

While in Europe he had corresponded occasionally with the "Courier and Enquirer," and with the "Tribune," and on his return he became musical critic and travelling correspondent of the latter journal. He had already done, and he continued to do, some writing for "Harper's Monthly." In 1853 he became associated with Parke Godwin and Charles F. Briggs in the editorship of "Putnam's Magazine," in whose pages there first appeared those exquisite satires under the title of "the Potiphar Papers." About this time he engaged in the only business enterprise of his life, the results of which are thus related in "The Nation," of September 15th, which claims to give a true account of it, as well as a statement of his brave and manly conduct in meeting the disastrous results.

"After the failure of Dix, Edwards & Co., and the Putnams, Mr. Curtis and a Mr. Miller established a publishing house under the firm-style of Miller & Curtis. Mr. Francis G. Shaw, Curtis's father-in-law, became a special partner therein. Owing to some oversight on the part of the lawyers who drafted the papers, as to a proper publication of the limited co-partnership, the creditors of Miller and Curtis informed Mr. Shaw, subsequent to the failure of Miller & Curtis, that they intended to collect all deficits from him as a general partner. Mr. Shaw made good all such deficits, and Mr. Curtis thereafter reimbursed Mr.

Shaw, taking the whole load upon his own shoulders. He accomplished the task after years of arduous labor. With both parties, Mr. Shaw and Mr. Curtis, it was a case of *noblesse oblige*. Mr. Shaw attempted no legal defence; Mr. Curtis did not entertain the idea of taxing the generosity of his wife's father. Both men were the possessors of minds wholly imbued with absolute honor. That such minds have existed and do exist is the glory of our past and the hope of our future."

On the death of Henry J. Raymond, in 1869, Mr. Curtis was offered the editorship of "The Times," but declined it, with its princely income; as he had all along declined the various offices of trust and distinction, which were showered upon him by successive Presidents, accepting only the chairmanship of the "Civil Service Commission," which was largely his own creation.

In April, 1854, Mr. Curtis became the occupant of the "Easy Chair," in "Harper's Monthly," which place he filled for nearly forty years, and till almost the day of his death, to the edification, instruction and delight of untold thousands of admiring readers. In 1863 he became political editor of "Harper's Weekly," for which he also continued to write clearly, forcibly and with ever increasing influence up to July of this year, when his sufferings from disease put an end to his life-work.

In this hasty and imperfect sketch a notice of Mr. Curtis's summer home at Ashfield, must not be omitted. In 1864 he was the guest of Professor Norton, at his country home there, and the next summer he hired and occupied a small cottage near the village; from 1868 to 1873 he occupied the home of Professor Norton during the latter's absence in Europe; later on he bought in the place a substantial and commodious farmhouse, which has since been his summer home.

From the beginning of his residence at Ashfield he was interested in village affairs and ready to do his share in all

good work for the town. Of his life in Ashfield, Professor Norton says: "His residence there has been a true blessing to the town, and the connection of his life with that of the Ashfield community will be an enduring source of pride and healthy stimulus to its people."

The following description of Mr. Curtis is from the "New York Times": "His form was manly, strongly built and exquisitely graceful. His head was of noble cast and bearing, his features rugged but firmly cut; his forehead was square, broad and massive; his lips full and mobile, and of classic modelling; his eyes of blue gray, large, deep set under shaggy brows lighted the shadow as with an altar flame, so pure, so gentle, and so profound was their expression. His voice was a most fortunate organ. Deep and musical; clear and bright in the lighter passages, ringing now like a bugle, now tender and flute-like, and now vibrating in solemn organ notes, that hushed the intense emotion that it aroused."

Of the various cordial and appreciative notices of Mr. Curtis, which have appeared since his death, it would be easy to fill a volume; and the temptation is strong to make copious extracts therefrom; but we limit ourselves to the few remarks which follow.

From the "New York Tribune," we quote the following: "In all that the word implies he was a gentleman; he was the master of a style as pure as that of Addison and as flexible as that of Lamb. In its characteristic quality, however, it does not resemble either of those models. The influences that were most intimately concerned in forming his mind were Emerson and Thackeray. He had the broad vision and the fresh, brave, aspiring spirit of the one, and he combined with these the satirical playfulness, the cordial detestation of shams, and the subtle commingling of raillery and tender sentiments that are characteristic of the other."

The "New York Times" says: "There is no nobler example in recent American history (it is not extravagant

to say there is none in all our history) for the young American to follow. And if with his proud modesty Mr. Curtis put aside, as he did, many places of apparent distinction—his career * * * is written in the history of all that is purest, all that is the most inspiring and worthy in the history of the country in his time.”

From Howells we quote this sentence :

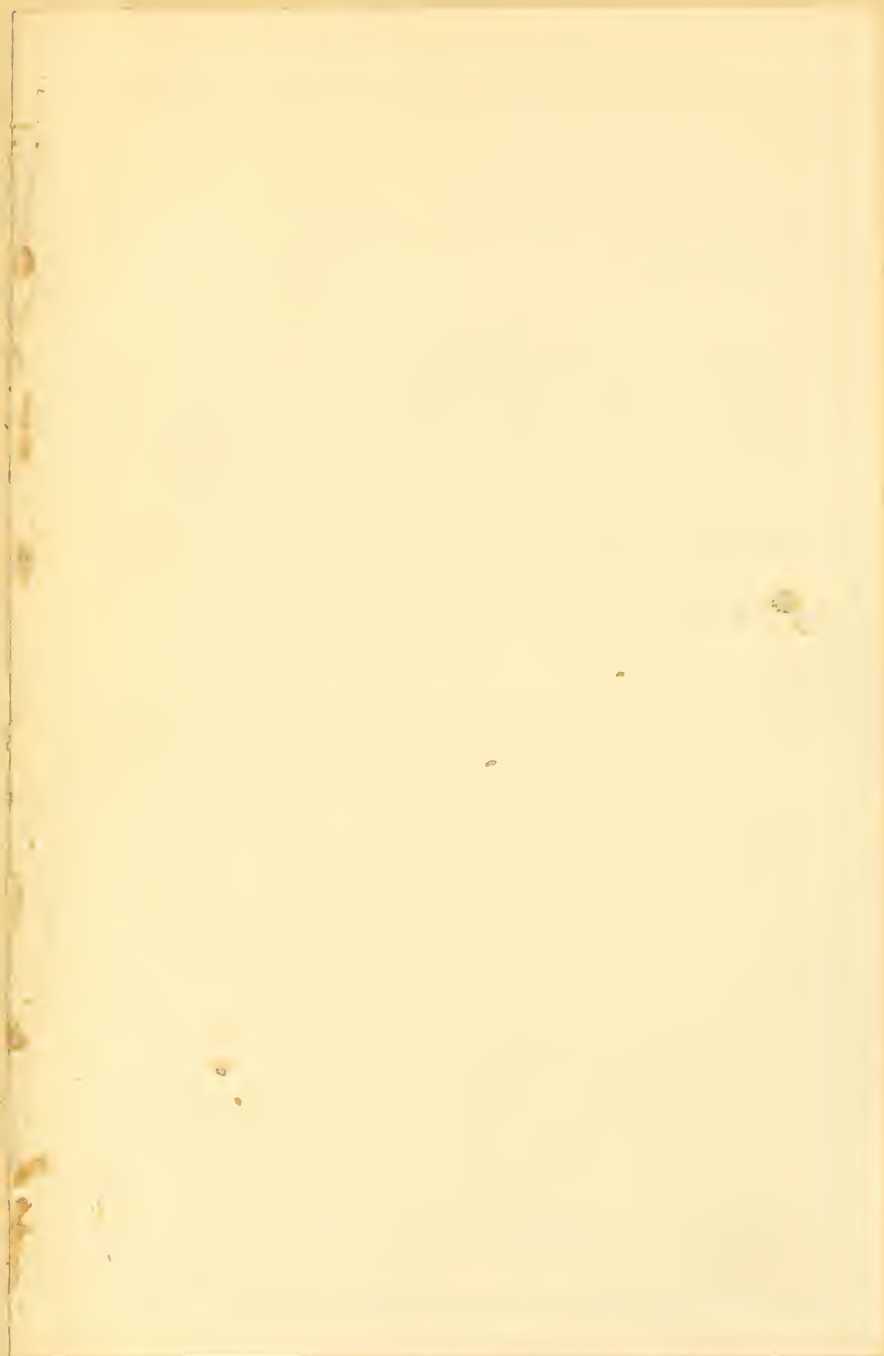
“ He was so wisely tolerant and so gently steadfast in his opinions that no one ever thought of him as a fanatic, though many who held his opinions were assailed as fanatics, and suffered the shame if they did not wear the palm of martyrdom.”

But of all that has been said, nothing better applies to him than his own words, written of Lowell (in a letter to “the Critic,” dated February, 1889), from which we quote the following : “There are few men who are now active leaders of American thought and opinion in their noblest directions, who are not profoundly indebted to the genius which has irradiated, charmed and purified their lives ; guided and strengthened them as citizens by the lofty wisdom of the patriot and statesman ; instructed and amazed them by the rich resources of the scholar, and inspired them by the instinctive rectitude, the delightful wit and quick sympathy of the man.”

In a country where we worship the majority, Mr. Curtis has shown us the power of manly independence, and he is himself the illustration of the truth which his friend commends to his countrymen,—“The measure of a nation’s true success is the amount it has contributed to the thought, the moral energy, the intellectual happiness, the spiritual hope and consolation of mankind.”

Dr. Chadwick, in his funeral sermon, says : “ He was one of the happiest of men—happy in his friends, happy in his work, and still further happy in the spiritual companionship which he enjoyed with all the noblest spirits of the world, whom not seeing he loved. Sidney and Russell,

Hampden and Vane, James Otis and Samuel Adams, these were to him as living men, to whom he looked for inspiration in his good endeavor, and he was not unworthy to be accounted one of their glorious company."



Worcester Dec 15 '93

Professor Norton

Dear Sir

This is to thank you for publishing
those delightful volumes of Lowell's
Letters, which every one who reads
them must also thank you for:
my object in writing, besides expressing
my thanks, is to suggest to you
the doing the further service to the
public by a similar work in behalf of
The late Geo. W. Curtis, whose works
I am glad to know you are
now publishing. —

Thinking that you may find
some hints or details of his
antecedents not known to you
I send herewith a paper

which was read before some of our
societies a year ago -

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